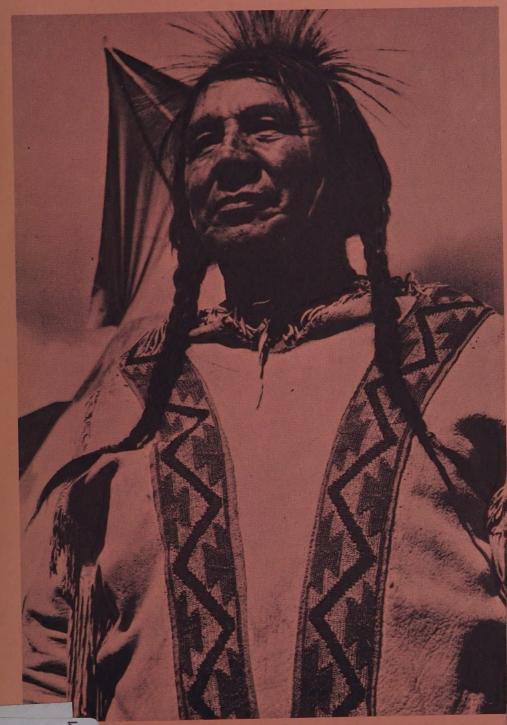
TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING



THE CANADIAN INDIAN

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By J. Eldon Andrews

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A BETTER
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OF

THE CANADIAN INDIAN

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TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CANADIAN INDIAN

We know, actually, more about our mission work among the Indians than we do about the Indians themselves. We need to know the Indian better in order to plan our missionary strategy for the future on a broader anthropological basis and with deeper wisdom than we have sometimes shown in the past. How can we preach the Christian Gospel effectively into a situation which so many of us at best understand only dimly? Perhaps I can help you to understand the Indian - as he was and as he is, and as an object of our missionary activity - a little better.

Most people tend to think of the Indian, perhaps, as a victim of past injustice, as a primitive savage, as lazy and shiftless, dishonest, undependable as a worker, wasteful, a squatter and a sponger, as a thief, even, not very clean, and a little stupid. Finally, we have been filled up with the notion that there is no use doing anything much for the Indian, least of all educating him, because he will only return to the reservation anyway to dangle his feet in the water. Such notions, hopelessly mixed-up and uninformed, and therefore fundamentally false, point up sharply the extent to which we have failed to understand the Indian and his problems. Yet most of these notions have just enough truth in them to keep them alive, though certainly no more. Let us take a look at these ideas - all too general among white people - dealing with them one by one and in more or less detail as they seem to require. At the same time we shall keep in mind our obligations, as a Church, to the Indian, and our part in the missionary task.

THE BEGINNING

To begin at the beginning, was the Indian the victim of unjust treatment in the past? This question is much too complicated to answer with a simple yes or no. Not all Indians were similarly treated in all places at all times by all white people. We need to keep in mind the widespread geographic distribution of the Indian and his culture. He was by no means confined to what are now the United States and Canada. He ranged over two full continents and occupied the adjacent islands. In some places he had developed mighty and magnificent civilizations. Since the beginning of European expansion in the fifteenth century the Indian has, sometimes, and in some places, been the victim of indignity, cruelty, deceit, and the target even of systematic and deliberate campaigns which had as their aim the eventual extermination of his person, his religion, and his culture. Yet all of this needs to be seen in the larger perspective within which it properly belongs. Civilizations spread havoc when they are on the move, and Western civilization was no exception. But the movements and havoc of civilizations on the move are not subject to the conscious control of any man or nation.

Canada may be justifiably proud of her record in her dealings with the Indians. Her record is not spotless, of course, but it is the cleanest in the world. A foremost authority on Indians pays tribute to the Canadian record when he says, "It means much that there is one Commonwealth in the Western world - there is only one - which from beginning to end has shown moral integrity in dealing with Indians and

has kept the faith." It is to Canada that this authority refers.

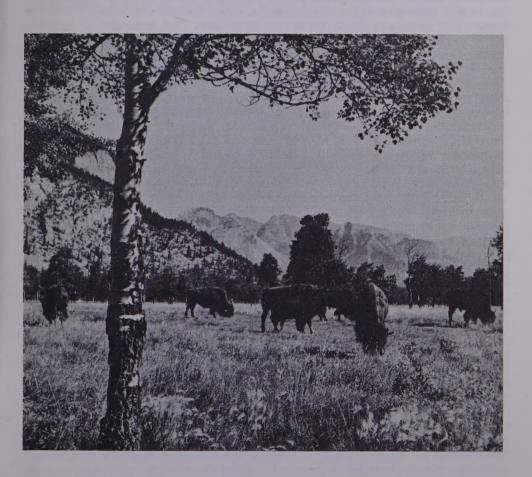
FROM THE INDIAN POINT OF VIEW

Yet, let us try to see this whole situation in somewhat the way the Indian himself must see it. The initial contacts between white men and Indians were marked by cordial welcome on the part of the Indian. This situation was shortlived, however, in most places. Gradually the Indian came to sense in the white man a new and subtle kind of enemy whom he did not understand, a slave-raider, a cunning bargainer who rarely lost a bargain and often took unfair advantage of the Indian. Even the Pilgrims, sincere and godly men that they were, tended to regard the Indian merely as a savage, and therefore not a person in the true sense of the word. Mutual misunderstanding, suspicion, fear, lack of communications, the language barrier, all of these and many other factors made difficult and often tragic the early relationships between white men and Indians. What looks like simple unfair treatment of the Indian was more often, perhaps, much more akin to mutual misunderstanding between two groups which had few if any cultural elements in common.

Take, for example, the matter of European imperial and commercial expansion to which I referred only a moment ago. To us it appears as a phase of history, a natural outcome of the growth and spread of Western civilization. To the Indian the picture looks vastly different indeed. So far as the Indian was concerned, it was not the Spaniards, the Dutch, the Portugese, or the English, who brought his Golden Age to an end, but the appearance of the white man without regard for his nationality. The white man, moreover, was often motivated by interests which were incomprehensible to the Indian. In the matter of land, for example, the philosophy of the two groups was as opposite as anything could be. The Indian believed in communal ownership. This idea was so much a part of his concept of the fundamental nature of things that the Indian was, in fact, very slow to realize precisely what it was the white man was after. Even when he ceded his land by conquest or by treaty, the Indian could not really believe that the white man was serious when he thought of land as a thing which could be divided among individuals or exploited for individual gain. The Indian knew his lands were gone, of course, and gone forever, but his capitulation was really a kind of tentative compromise in the face of a situation which he did not understand.

Both white men and Indians tend to feel that unjust treatment of the Indian was much more universal than it actually was. To understand this from the viewpoint of the Indian we need to try to grasp the sense in which the Indian "memory" differs from our own, because it does, you know. We single out in memory those events which have a more or less direct bearing on our lives as individuals. The Indian, however, retains in memory rather the general trend of events which affected the life of the race or tribe as a whole. As a nomad, however, he carried his memories and tribal lore wherever he went, back and forth across our international and political boundaries, which had no meaning for him, not distinguishing treatment in one place from treatment elsewhere. His memory was not individual so much as racial and tribal. The Indian has no conception of history as a procession of events and movements one of which leads on to some new development. He shares rather in a colossal storehouse of racial lore, in which events have been all churned up together, and have solidified into a kind of general traditional impression that he was "done in" by the white man. What the Indian remembers is that as a race he was steadily losing ground before the onrush of the great white tide.

Finally, we may note that European expansion was followed or spearheaded by hordes of predatory adventurers. Such men operated singly or in small groups, and were motivated solely by self-interest; they were without moral scruples, irresponsible. They managed to remain beyond the reaches of whatever law had been established, and frequently broke faith with natives who had befriended them. Such men frequently established the earliest contacts of white with native populations, and provided distasteful introductions to the main advance of white civilization still bringing up the rear. In search of fertile lands, game, or gold, they left behind them a trail of suspicion, disrespect, and bad feeling, often prejudicing the natives against white civilization in advance of its arrival. Frequently they ruined years of patient work by sincere officials, traders, and other settlers who with wisdom and sympathy had established friendly and mutually beneficial relations with native peoples. Though their percentage of the total invading population was small, the havoc wrought by such men is inestimable; its consequences have been far-reaching and enduring, and to this day we continue to reap the ugly results of it in our relations with the Indians.



THE CULTURE OF THE INDIAN

Again, was the Indian merely a "savage"? We can no longer draw the sharp lines we used to draw between savagery and civilization. The development of the sociological sciences has seen to that. We now understand that "savage" societies were in reality extremely complex civilizations possessing all the essential elements of culture known to us. Primitive cultures were extremely delicately adapted to the conditions out of which they grew; all their component parts were exquisitely balanced and adjusted in relation to each other; their social, economic, and religious functions were so inseparably intermingled that no clear distinctions may be drawn among them. To upset one aspect of such a culture might easily mean to precipitate the disintegration of all the others. To destroy or suppress the idols or rites employed in a native vegetative cult, for example, could never be merely a religious act with only religious consequences. It might also result in the more or less complete collapse of the native economy and the disorganization of the internal structure of the native society. We may think that there is no connection between the magic rites of the primitive rain-maker on the one hand, and the natural phenomenon of rainfall on the other. But primitive life is shot through with the conviction that intensity and concentration of the human will is able to move the forces of nature. This is magic, of course, but it performs in primitive societies many of the functions of relatively highly developed scientific techniques in more advanced cultures.

Or take the suppression of the Sun Dance among the Plains Indians. This festival was the only cohesive force holding tribal organization together. At its conclusion the participating groups dispersed to the buffalo hunting grounds with their sense of tribal unity and well-being renewed, to remain separated for the rest of the year. While the suppression of this festival eliminated certain abuses, and kept the Plains Indian, no longer a hunter, but now a farmer, in his fields during the ploughing season, it also contributed substantially to the disintegration of the tribal system upon

which the life and culture of the Plains Indians largely depended.

These two illustrations should help to make it clear that such features of primitive life are to be treated lightly only at the peril of possible disastrous consequences to the culture, happiness, and even physical welfare, of the people involved. Yet, does this mean that Christianity is to be expected to adapt itself to, or to adopt, elements of primitive culture which are incompatible with true Christian faith? That Christianity is not to be expected to transform the way of life of those to whom it goes? By no means. It does mean, however, that it is the responsibility of the Church and of the missionary, insofar as it is humanly possible, to know exactly what they are doing when they set fundamental cultural changes into motion by the preaching of the Christian Gospel. In order to preach the Gospel effectively, that is to say, we need to know all we are able to learn about the situation into which it is preached. The Gospel must be interpreted in terms of the culture to which it is brought, which is not at all the same as to say that its truths are to be distorted by adaptation to pagan beliefs and practices. Otherwise its fate will be to fall upon uncomprehending ears, to be no more received or understood than a foreign tongue. To learn the spoken language of his people is only one of the tasks of the Christian missionary. He must also learn to speak and think in terms of that broader language which is their culture and their way of life. Only then can he preach the Christian Gospel to his people in terms which will have real meaning for them.

It would be a very grave error indeed if we should conclude from all of this that it only goes to prove that the Indian was merely a primitive savage. Or worse yet, that it proves he is still so. The Indian has come a very long way indeed in the last century and a half or so, and for this the Churches need not be backward in taking perhaps a major share of the credit. Yet, we should make a graver error still if we should fail to recognize the simple fact that the Indians with whom our Church works today are removed from primitivity, in as pure a form as it is to be found anywhere in the world, by only a very few generations - in some parts of the country by only two or three generations at most. Primitive motivations and customs, or vestiges of them, still play a very important - even essential - role in the life of the ordinary Indian today.

INDIANS AND WARFARE

The earliest records of Indian-white contacts indicate that the explorers, for example, found the Indians to be anything but savage. Everyone knows how Columbus described them as gentle beings, curious and merry, walking in beauty, and possessors of a spiritual religion. Sir Francis Drake thought that the Indians were people whose natures could hardly be described except through the language of music; peoples joyously hospitable, who seemed free as birds.

It is certainly true to say that, generally speaking, though with some tribal exceptions perhaps, the Indians were gentle and peaceloving people. They engaged in inter-tribal wars, to be sure, but wars among them followed definite traditional rules, and often resembled inter-tribal games, rough though they were. Strange as it may seem to us, wars in primitive societies are often closely related to humour, and the motives for war familiar to us are rarely in evidence. In such wars religious rites, dancing, hurling of insults back and forth between opposing sides, downright clowning, and so on, were curiously mixed up with the more serious business of avenging the enemy. The members of military clubs and societies were often at the same time the professional buffoons of the tribe, the champions of organized nonsense. Ritual played an important part in Indian wars, both sides participating, proceeding step by step, taking turns according to accepted rule. Scalps or other trophies were taken not from sheer love of killings as we may think, but in response to the primitive compulsion to establish the valour of the warrior. Many Indians, moreover, felt a deep sense of horror and pollution in the act of killings, and engaged in ritual purifications and washings for a fortnight or more after scalping or other wise killing an enemy.

The fact that some of the above may not make very much sense to us does not alter the fact that it made very good sense indeed to primitive people. War in their societies did not have the same purpose or aims that it does in ours, and one of its main functions was to increase and maintain the hardihood of the male population, for upon this hardihood the life and

future of the tribe depended.

THE WHITE MAN'S INFLUENCE ON INDIAN WARFARE

With the coming of the white man much of this changed. When we are tempted to think of the Indian as a savage, we will do well to remember that when he fought with white men he was savagely fighting back against the threat, more often real than imagined, of tribal extermination. In tribal societies death of the individual has no real meaning except as it may affect the life and future security of the tribe as a whole. It was not uncommon among American Indian tribes, if further resistance seemed fruitless, to substitute the will to die for the normal will to live. When this happened the white man was confronted by a new problem, more frustrating than the old, that of standing helplessly by while the slow relentless process of tribal suicide was enacted and dragged over the years before his eyes. The Indians are a proud people, and justly so.

THE INDIAN CHARACTERISTICS

What is misunderstood in the Indian for lack of spontaneity, or for a kind of native sluggishness in emotional response, is in reality a protective shell of dignified reserve behind which he withdraws in the presence of non-Indian people whom he has not yet chosen to take into his confidence. In general this attitude is pretty typical of the Indian's response to white civilization as a whole, not excluding, let us bear in mind, its religious and missionary advances in his direction. It behooves the missionary, or anyone else who wishes to approach the Indian, to tread with extreme caution in his direction and in his midst. This is not to say that he is treacherous, for he is characterized by a most winsome kind of sincerity and shy innocence; but the Indian possesses to a very high degree that faculty, which is common and highly developed among Oriental peoples the world over, I think, of erecting in the presence of unwelcome intrusion a frigid wall of impenetrable reserve through which none may pass except at the bidding of the Indian himself. Our dominant reactions in the face of this sometimes unyielding attitude on the part of the Indian tend to be impatience, frustration, sometimes even indignation and anger. There is, we tend to feel, something perverse about the Indian who so persistently refuses so much of what we have to offer. There is only one solution to this problem: dedicated, thorough, scientific anthropological research into the psychology and culture of the Indian in order to gain for ourselves sympathetic understanding not only of him, but of his way of life.

WHAT OF OTHER NOTIONS

What of some of those other notions about Indians which seem to be prevalent if not general among white people? The first thing we have to remember, of course, is that among Indians, as among ourselves or any other people, there are all types, both good and poor.

To begin at the head of the list which I noted in the second paragraph of this section, the Indian is not lazy and shiftless; he merely has a philosophy of work, and of the value of possessions incidentally, which is different from ours. The Indian believes that enough is enough. The white man believes that when he has enough he is only just beginning. In primitive societies, moreover, the division of labour as between men and women is always exceedingly sharp. Indians still tend to retain many of the old distinctions even though in their changing society the original function served by some of these distinctions is no longer clear or valid. Far from being dishonest, we may note also, the Indian is usually scrupulously, almost naively, honest. Frequently, I believe, his vocabulary did not even possess words to describe the kind of deceit which was practised upon him from time to time by unscrupulous white men. In the end the Indian was overcome as much by a kind of psychological paralysis as by superior physical force. Sometimes he was left stunned and stripped of all his ability to act in the face of unfaithfulness and guile, because there was nothing in his tradition or experience by aid of which he could interpret or understand the new forms of deceit which were introduced by white society.

Given work that is suitable to his background, training, and temperament, the Indian is not undependable as a worker, but extremely conscientious and reliable. He has, however, a different conception of

"Time" from ours, and this sometimes lands both the Indian and his white employer into embarrassing situations. The Indian tends to think in terms of seasons rather than in terms of days and hours, which is a bit awkward.

Is the Indian wasteful? Certainly not by nature. Traditionally he was a natural conservationist, as anyone who knows anything about Indians will testify. He is so still, so far as the natural resources of our country are concerned. However, he does not think of the value of things in terms of their immediate usefulness. The average Indian is still somewhat baffled, I think, by the plentitude which exists in white society. His native sense of frugality and economy, upon which his very existence once depended, appears to him to have lost much of his old meaning.



THE INDIAN MODE OF LIFE

What of the common notion that the Indian is a squatter and a sponger? Most Indians were nomadic, that is to say, they led a wandering and not a settled life. They had a whole continent over which to roam, and many of them did not live in settled villages. Their homes, therefore, were not of the type or construction that could be handed down from father to son, but were rather transportable items of gear somewhat in the nature of baggage. The Northern Indian particularly, is still a nomad. This is not at all the same thing as being a squatter and a sponger. Moreover, the Indian rarely steals in our sense of the word. Traditionally, stealing, like warfare, had as one of its primary functions the establishment of the valour and superior cunning of the tribesman. When a Crow Indian stole a horse from a neighbouring tribe, to take one example - we are talking now about the early days before the influence of the white man, (the Spanish had imported horses in such numbers that, strayed, stolen, and running wild, the horse had transformed the life of the Plains Indians long before they ever saw a white man) - significance attached not to stealing just any old horse, but to stealing the best obtainable, in broad daylight, from the centre of the compound, under the noses, and often under the very eyes, of the enemy.

We need to recall in this connection also that the Indian tends to think in terms of communal ownership rather than in terms of private property. The rule of his old society was the unlocked door. Any Indian, lost, cold, or hungry during the journey was free to enter a cabin even in the absence of the Indian owner and help himself, not to anything he wanted, of course, but to anything he needed to sustain him on his way, no questions asked. Great shame attached to the abuse of such privilege

and hospitality.

Perhaps many Indians are not very careful about bodily cleanliness but this is a long story. Everyone has heard how the Indians used to rub their bodies down with snow in winter, and daily bathed in streams during the rest of the year. Many factors enter into the changes in this respect which are evident, by no means in all, but in some present-day Indians. All of these factors had to do with the coming of white civilization. The settled, much more public life of the reserve is one factor. (The Indian is very shy.) The change of home from tepee to cabin with a consequent loss of hardihood, is another. Susceptibility to tuberculosis and other diseases unknown before the arrival of the white man, is another. There are other reasons, but these are enough to go on, and if you add to them the fact that there is evident in all this a sort of silent protest against the fastidiousness of the white man, you will see what I mean.

HELPING THROUGH EDUCATION

Far from being stupid, the Indian is an exceedingly quick learner. As a matter of fact he tends to grasp things so quickly and thoroughly the first time he sees or hears them that repetition and practice annoy him. This, of course, is a distinct disadvantage to him in a white society.

Now what about trying to help the Indian, especially by educating him? It is at this point in our dealings with the Indian that we need to re-learn the Christian lesson of humility. In the first place we do well to remember that the Indian did not invite us to this country, though he welcomed us when we came. So far as we know the Indian was doing very well by himself before we came. He is, as a matter of fact, and this is not easy for us to take, probably much more interested in being left alone than he is in being helped. Since we cannot leave him alone - and we cannot, mind you; quite literally it is impossible for us to leave him alone - the Indian is usually willing enough to be helped to the things he wants, and to some things which he does not want but which he takes because we seem so anxious to give them to him. So far as education is



concerned the Indian's conception of it is vastly different from the organized school system to which we hold. True, too, the vast majority of Indians, after their schooling, return to the reserves. But whose idea were reservations in the first place? Where, the Indian might ask, did they think we might go? All too often white prejudice has made it all too clear to the Indian where he was wanted and where he was not wanted. The Indian tends to exaggerate the difficulties, I think, sometimes to imagine them where they do not exist, but there are very real difficulties, nevertheless, facing the Indian who tries to cross over the line into white society. The greatest difficulty, if it can be called a difficulty at all, lies in the fact that the Indian is not aware of any urgent need to do so. Nor does he have much desire to do so.

Actually, especially in Canada, there are relatively few Indians of professional status. This, however, is more of a comment upon our educational methods and policy in past years than it is upon the ability or initiative of the Indian.

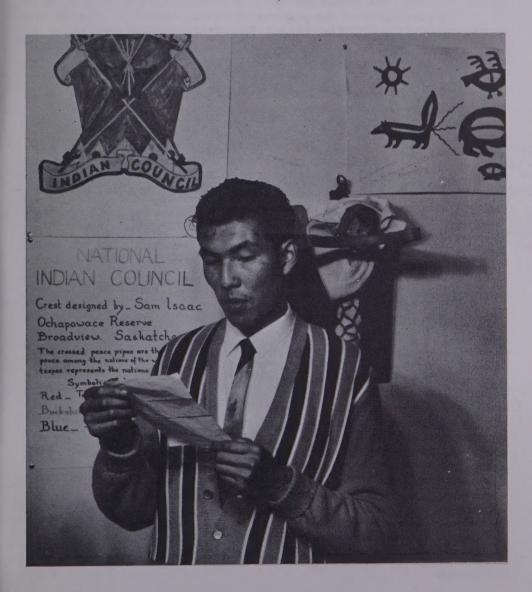
THE INDIAN RESISTS ASSIMILATION

In all our thinking about the Indian, we need to bear in mind the fact that one of the most striking features of Indian-white relationships has been the exceptional racial and cultural tenacity of the Indian. To a degree that is remarkable, he has successfully resisted assimilation by the overwhelmingly aggressive white civilization with which he has been in contact for over four hundred years and by which he has been more or less completely surrounded for at least a century and a half. While the various cultures of the Indian were largely supplanted, they were never allowed to die even though in some respects they may live on only in racial and tribal memory. The Indian selected what he wanted from the invading environment, and to the present day has obdurately continued to resist the major impact of Western civilization upon his own. The Indian yielded eventually to the onslaught of European civilization with all its varied modes of attack aimed directly, sometimes, against his person, his lands, his religion, and his culture. But he yielded only when he realized the immensity of the physical forces which were pitted against him. When he yielded, however, he did not enter the main stream of European life which flowed over and around him, but went, so to speak, into cultural hiding, and from this vantage point he has continued to this day to nurse, sometimes his wounds, but always his way of life. All too often the white man's response to this situation, unfortunately, has been to try to pry the Indian out of this ethnic and cultural fastness behind which he has withdrawn, rather than to lead and guide him out into full participation of Canadian life.

A NEW BEGINNING

Did we assume in the early days that the Indian was gradually dying out? That the remnants of his race would fast become extinct or assimilated into the general population? That he would thus make his contribution and quietly disappear? Did we envisage our task as primarily a mission of mercy administered, as it were, to a dying race? In some ways we did, I think, and to the extent that we did so, we were vastly wrong - through nobody's fault, of course, because for several decades there was every indication that the situation was precisely so.

Whatever our understanding of the task in days gone by, the situation of today has so changed as to make imperative a new beginning, which must have as its aim not to putter about the surface of the vast task which confronts us, but to get underneath it. This, I am convinced, we can do only by the careful choice and training of specialized leaders and researchers, particularly in the fields of anthropology and linguistics. We need to give such workers from five to ten years in which to place at the disposal of the Church a preliminary body of specialized scientific knowledge about the Indian and his culture, including his language, on the basis of which the Church may proceed with its future work. Does this mean that in the meantime we can get nowhere? Or that work must be suspended? Certainly not. It does mean, however, that unless we begin immediately to deal with the "Indian Problem" with some such more realistic approach than we have used in the past, very soon we may see this door to missionary activity closed in our faces.



WESTERN CIVILIZATION AND PRIMITIVE

The result of the impact of Western civilization upon primitive cultures has always been to shake them from their foundations. The shock of the contact and spread of European culture sometimes threatened, and in some few instances actually accomplished, the total extinction of native populations and cultures. We should be seriously at fault if we did not recognize at least the possibility that the Christian Church through its missions may have been deeply involved sometimes in the premature disintegration of native cultures. Moreover, we have constantly to remind ourselves that the recipient of our culture tends to equate Christianity with Western civilization itself and rarely draws the distinction, which we do, between them. There is no greater impediment to the spread of the Christian Gospel, at home or abroad, than this unfortunate circumstance. However, the blame for the dire consequences to native cultures which have accompanied the process of Westernization is not to be laid at the doors of the Christian Church. Wherever European civilization has gone, the missionary followed, and motivated by the constraint of Christ upon him, was always in the forefront of the struggle to protect the native from the ravages of cultural shock, disease, exploitation, heartless inconsideration, injustice, and where it threatened, actual physical extinction.

The development of the sociological sciences in particular has helped the Church to analyse its missionary zeal. One result has been that Christian missions in our day are entering a new and more thoughtful phase. We are taking time out, so to speak, to assess the accomplishments and failures of the past, to apply the growing mass of relevant sociological and anthropological knowledge, and in the light of it, to plan our strategy for the future.

What I have written points up fairly sharply, I hope, the fact that in the past we have not often enough gone out to search for and find the Indian where he is, nor been ready enough to accept him for who he is. We have been more concerned than we should have been, I think, to make of him a poor imitation of the white man, rather than to make of him an honest-to goodness good Indian. Herein lies the key, I am almost certain, to the mistakes and relatively slow progress which we have made in the past. By this also, we must be guided for the future. The ultimate destiny of the Indian, undoubtedly, is total assimilation. The Indian knows this. No need to whisper it while he is not around; no need to flaunt it either. The Indian has known it for a very long time. But the process of assimilation is a slow one. Not in our lifetime nor in the lifetime of any Indian now living will it be completed. No one knows how long it will take, and estimates would need to be revised continually. The next two centuries may see the process in its final phases. As long as the process continues the Indian needs our guidance and our help. But to hurry the process of assimilation unduly is to invite disaster. We could do much worse than to let the Indian, with all the help and Christian nurture that the Church can give him, set the pace, and accomplish as much as he can of this in his own good time.

This article, if it awakens in the minds even of a few readers, the understanding that the problems involved in our mission to the Indians are not so simple as they appear on the surface; or if it arouses even one of its readers to go out to meet the challenge of a full-time vocation in Indian mission or research work, will have served its purpose very well indeed.

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